Identity and confession in the Byzantine Empire at the beginning of the Middle Ages

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IDENTITY AND CONFESSION IN THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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Abstract

The correct religious confession resides at the core of the Byzantine identity at the beginning of the Middle Ages, together with the pagan Greek-Roman tradition. Historians and chroniclers from this period use elements with a religious connotation in different proportions in their works, but even those who don't speak openly about Christianity share a Christian identity. There is a tension between the classical tradition of writing history and the Christian doctrine, the historians avoiding Christian terminology because it didn't exist in the works they used as a model. This tension disappears from the 7th century onwards, when the Christianization of the historical terminology becomes the norm.

Keywords: Byzantium, historiography, Middle Ages, confession, heresy.

The aim of this article is to show how the chroniclers and the historians from the beginning of the Middle Ages use religion to forge a specific identity for their own people. I will refer to narrative sources because they help us understand the complex process of the emergence of the new Byzantine identity, heir of the Roman one, but different through the importance of Christian religion and the imposition of Greek language.

The historians and the chroniclers who wrote between the 6th and the 9th centuries in Byzantium were interested not only in the narration of historical events, but also in the creation of a Byzantine identity, even if they continued to use the name of *Rhomaioi*, which means Romans, to designate their compatriots. This identity was defined by reference to the ancient Romans, whom they saw as ancestors, and to the Barbarians, their neighbours, allies or enemies. There are "varied ways in which different late antique groups and communities defined their own socio-political borders and secured in-group identities by means of discourses[2]" about identity, and especially the religious one. Therefore, the historians and chroniclers of this period are advocates of a

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[2] Eduard Iricinschi and Holger Zellentin, eds., *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*. Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, 119, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2008.

new kind of identity, defined firstly by the Roman political heritage and secondly by the Christian faith. As Yitzhak Hen pointed out "the late Roman perception of kingship was highly influenced by Christian and biblical ideas as well"[3]. However, it is true that the importance attributed to the political or the religious dimension differs from author to author and from period to period. On the other hand, each author adds to the identity that he defines some elements related to the ideal of civilization in contrast with barbarians. But finally, the limits of civilization are coincidental with those of the correct, chalcedonian confession.

In the Byzantine period the writing of history continued the late Roman tradition of political and military monograph, on the one hand, and on the other, the universal chronicle. The latter, which started with the Genesis and was more and more interested in contemporary events, became predominant as time went by. The chroniclers are more preoccupied with religious problems than the historians, who used ancient models from the period of Thucydides and often simply ignored religious issues which were not suitable for the classical history they tried to write. Because of this lack of interest in religious problems, which were so characteristic for the period they lived in, modern historians believed that some historians, like Procopius of Caesarea and Agathias were atheist, sceptic or heretic[4]. It is right that Procopius deliberately neglected Christological debates of his time, considering them "vain questionings"[5], and that he also avoided Christian terminology. He spoke about Christians as he was trying to explain, like a contemporary anthropologist, the customs of a not yet studied Amazonian tribe – those temples called churches by the Christians[6] or as "those of the Christians who are more careful in their observance, whom they call monks"[7]. A clear explanation of the deliberate refusal to use Christian terminology is given by Agathias, who told his audience that he prefers not to give a place its contemporary Christian name, but the ancient one, because "such a practice is more in keeping with the style of historical writing"[8]. Procopius and Agathias were, in reality, just as good Christians as Malalas, their superstitious contemporary author of a chronicle. As Averil Cameron had shown convincingly many years ago, the terminology could not be used as proof of the historian's paganism, because the convention of the classical history genre

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[3] Yitzhak Hen, *The Uses of the Bible and the Perception of Kingship in Merovingian Gaul*, "Early Medieval Europe", 1998, 7, 3, p. 286.

[4] A reiteration of this theory in Anthony Khaldelis, "The Historical and Religious Views of Agathias. A Reinterpretation", *Byzantion*, 69, 1999, p. 206-252.

[5] Procopius, *History of the Wars*, ed. H. B. Dewing, London, William Heineman Ltd., 1919, VIII, III. 9.

[6] *Ibidem*, II, IX.14

[7] *Ibidem*, I, VII, 22.

[8] Agathias, *The Histories*, ed. Joseph D. Frendo, Walter De Gruyter, Berlin, New York, 1975, III, 5,7.

supposed the use of an archaising language forged in the 5th century BC which lacked, normally, Christian concepts[9].

So we can say that the great majority of late antique and early medieval Byzantine historians are laics (with a notable exception – Nikephore the Patriarch) with a strong orthodox Christian faith. Their faith seemed to be as sincere as that of their colleague chroniclers, many of them monks who stressed the importance of Christian religion.

Even if they didn't affirm this directly, the Byzantine chroniclers, and especially Malalas, who offered the model for an entire tradition which came after him, considered that the Romans became a new chosen people when they accepted the Christianity. Beginning with Constantine the Great a strong bond developed between the Roman Empire and Christianity. But even if Christianity became the core of the Byzantine identity, the classical system still coexists with the Christian one. In this classical system an important role is played by pagan values, used by our historians together with the Christian belief to put peoples on a scale of civilization.

The most important differences between the peoples are the religious ones, and their mutual comprehension and collaboration become more difficult when their religion is markedly different. For example, the historians talked about the endless wars fought at the oriental borders of the Empire between the Byzantines and the Persians, their hereditary enemy. The differences emphasized are linked to the ethnic and linguistic specifics of each people, both Byzantines and Persians needed translators when they had to negotiate[10]. Even if the language is a very important component of the identity[11], a source of differences and misunderstandings, the most important and impossible to elude are the religious differences, which are used as a political justification for the wars. The Christian Byzantines couldn't understand Zoroastrianism, a religion with beliefs and rituals considered barbaric and irrational. Agathias is the most representative of this tendency, because he did not understand and openly rejected what he considered as pagan burial rituals of Persians who didn't burry their deceased, but left them to be eaten by savage beasts[12].

We will not find the same rejection of paganism when the Byzantine chroniclers spoke about the Greeks and the Romans, considered their ancestors and their cultural model. The ancient Greco-Roman religion is considered a superstition and the gods from its pantheon are described as being simply

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[9] Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the sixth century*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1985. A different view which affirms that Procopius was a pagan was expressed recently by Anthony Khaldelis, *Procopius of Caesareea: Tyranny, History and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*, Philadelphia, 2004.

[10] Procopius, Wars, II, 6.

[11] Jean-Philippe Genet, "Identité, espace, langue", *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, 19 (2010), p. 8.

[12] Agathias, *Histories*, II, 31, 5-9.

mortals deified. Malalas offered the inspiration for this treatment when he wrote that Kronos "was a strong man who was the first to practise ruling" as a king in Assyria, and that he "had a son, named Picus, who was called Zeus by his parents"[13]. He was inspired by the rational method of interpretation, later called euhemerism[14], which suggested that mythological characters were at origin humans[15]. This voluntary laicisation of the ancient pagan religion was intended to lead to the exaltation of Christianity, the only true religion, but it never conduced to such a condemnation of Greco-Roman paganism as that of Zoroastrianism. The political allegiance of the chroniclers to their empire and the classical tradition, still alive in their education, didn't allow them to have an aggressive attitude against the religion of "Hellenes", their ancestors.

Another religion that is not accepted by our authors but not entirely condemned is Judaism, a prefiguration of Christianity. The universal chronicle begun always with the stories taken from the Ancient Testament, from Genesis to Moses and the ancestors of Christ, so the Judaic monotheism is situated only a level below the Christian religion. In the chronological scheme so dear to early medieval chroniclers, Moses and the Prophets from the Old Testament lived long before Plato and Aristotle, who have taken their ideas from them. This is why some of the philosophical thinking of the pagan Greeks could still be accepted by the Christians, because they were indirectly inspired by the God of Moses and the Prophets.

The pagan Greco-Roman tradition has also another cultural meaning, even if after Theodosius I the pagan religion became a crime against the state. The pagan works of art were present everywhere in the Byzantine world of our chroniclers, and they seemed quite pleased when some temples were destroyed. But those artistic objects could be acceptable when they were Christianized and placed in a new context. *Chronicon Pascale*, anonymous writing from the first half of the 7th century, has a detailed description of a statue of Apollo taken from Phrygia to Constantinople in order to be reworked to represent Emperor Constantine[16]. Malalas wrote about the wooden statue of Pallas Athena taken secretly by Constantine from Rome, brought to the new capital and buried under the porphyry column made for the statue of the Emperor in the new Forum[17].

Even if those who wrote about these actions were Christian authors, they still believed that the ancient pagan religious artifacts had a certain value and

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[13] *The Chronicle of John Malalas*, translated by Elisabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys and Roger Scott, with Brian Croke, Jenny Ferber, Simon Franklin, Alan James, Douglas Kelly, Ann Moffatt, Ann Nixon, Melbourne, 1986, I, 8.

[14] This method was founded by Euhemerus, a mythograph who lived around 300 BC and wrote a *Sacred History* at the court of King Cassander of Macedonia.

[15] Franco De Angelis and Benjamin Garstad, *Euhemerus in context*, Classical Antiquity, vol. 25, nr. 2, 2006, pp. 211-242.

[16] *Chronicon Paschale, A.D. 284-632,* ed. Michael Whitby, Liverpool, 1989, p. 528.

[17] Malalas, *op. cit.*, XIII, 320.

signification. Bringing them at Constantinople meant for them a legitimization of the new capital, the ancient Gods transferring their attributes and significations to the Christian god and giving a kind of protection to the Christian emperor.

This relative tolerance of some pagan symbols is however quite rare and it is expressed normally when they are reused in a Christian context. The paganism especially that one of more recent times, after Constantine's reign, is viewed by the chroniclers as an illness which has to be eliminated from the social body. The chroniclers gladly presented the destruction of ancient temples or the change of their destination in a way which desecrated them. For example, Malalas told how Emperor Theodosius II has transformed the temple of Aphrodite in asylum for prostitutes[18]. Of course, the most frequent case is that of temples transformed in churches. Recently, Alan Cameron expressed doubts that the pagan temples were still in use when they were demolished or transformed into churches, but the succession of a Christian building on the pagan site is a reality[19]. The same Malalas wrote about the temple of the Argonauts at Anaplous which became the church of Saint Michael because someone had a vision of the Archangel demanding this transformation[20]. As paganism disappeared from consciences, the ancient temples lost their signification and importance. When Hesychius Milesius wanted to localize an ancient temple of Poseidon in Rome he needed to use the church of Saint Menas as a topographic indication[21].

The historians are less interested in paganism and its avatars because of their choice to write about political and military subjects. Procopius is an exception with the condemnation of the persecution against Hellenes started by Justinian. But even Procopius has shown this interest in his Secret History, a kind of pamphlet, and not in his Wars, the monograph written in classical manner.

Paganism is usually seen as a danger for the elected people of Byzantium, because it could affect the privileged relation with the divinity. The manifestations linked with the paganism are severely repressed, as the practice of magic. Theophylact Simocatta who wrote in the first half of the 7th century presented the case of Paulus, accused of witchcraft, condemned and executed on the order of Emperor Maurice. It seems that Theophylact, as a classical historian, couldn't believe in such practices and he blames this condemnation whose responsibility was not, he said, of the emperor but of the patriarch who influenced Maurice[22].

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[18] *Ibidem*, XIII, 345.

[19] Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 798.

[20] Malalas, IV, 77-79.

[21] Hesychius Milesius, *Historia romana atque omnigena*, Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum, ed. C. Müller, Paris, 1851, vol. IV, fragment 4, 5.

[22] Teofilact Simocatta, I, 11, 21.

Nikephor the Patriarch believed in the existence of magical practices, only he didn't believe they could be efficient. He presented with consternation the pagan and barbaric practice of the inhabitants of Pergamum who, when besieged by the Persians, cut the womb of a pregnant woman and put the fetus in boiling water. Then they put the sleeves of their clothes in this water, believing that they would be invincible, but God punished them with paralysis, they couldn't use their swords and they were conquered[23].

What gives to the chosen people its special identity is the correct Christian confession which has a structuring role for the community. This is the reason Constantine, who established at the Council of Nicaea the correct, orthodox version of Christianity, is such an important figure in Byzantine chronicles. The history of his conversion is a type story we can find in each chronicle, inspired by the version given by Eusebius of Caesarea and by the legends. All the chroniclers presented the legendary version of Constantine being baptized as an orthodox at Rome by pope Sylvester. Only Theophanes the Confessor, a monk writing at the beginning of the 9th century, has also presented the version of the Arian baptism (historically the real one), but only for rejecting it.

The chroniclers were very attentive to the issue of the Council of Nicaea, where the confession considered correct, the orthodox one, was established. They presented Arianism, the confession condemned at Nicaea, as a danger for Christian community, even if they wrote centuries after year 325. But this condemnation is quite formal because the Arian heresy had long ago disappeared in the period when our chroniclers wrote. It is a paradox that Theophanes the Confessor, who wrote at such a long distance in time of the period when Arianism flourished, offered one of the most virulent condemnations of this heresy. When he showed the danger of Arianism, maybe he was thinking about Islam, seen in his period as a kind of Christian heresy, despite a possible access he could have had at Muslim sources that showed the religious differences[24]. And he was also contemporary with the events generated by another important Byzantine heresy, the Iconoclasm, which was backed during his lifetime by Isaurian emperors, as the Arianism benefited from the support of the successors of Constantine the Great.

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As a conclusion, in the historical writings we used the religious essence of Byzantine identity was defined mostly in a negative way, by firstly showing the deviations from it. The only authors who seemed obliged to define more

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[23] Nikephoros the Patriarch Of Constantinople, *Short History*, Text, translation and commentary, ed. Cyril Mango, Washington D. C., 1990, p. 53.

[24] Alan M. Guenther, "The Christian experience and interpretation of the early Muslim conquest and rule", *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 10:3, 1999, p. 364.

precisely their Orthodox identity were those contemporary with Iconoclasm, because they were involved in a political and ideological struggle against heresy.

Finally, how was the Byzantine identity presented in the historical works from the first medieval centuries? The inhabitants of Byzantium should have thought about God in the manner defined at the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, should have venerated the icons, the Saints, gone to the Church, converted pagan peoples to Christianity. Their Christian essence transformed them in a new Chosen People and gave them an Empire which was protected in a supernatural way by the Virgin and the Saints. At the end of a slow process the concepts of "Roman" that is Byzantine, and of "Christian" became entirely synonymous.